

Community Engagement: Home School Partnership

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Abstract

Five year old children starting their formal education in primary schools bring with them a range of informal mathematical understandings. Transitioning from an early childhood setting to the reception class at school can have a profound impact on their developing mathematical concepts. Traditionally their first teachers (parents, caregivers and whanau) gradually remove the support and encouragement and some of the familiar surroundings of their early childhood centres are no longer there. As children from 5 – 13 years of age spend approximately 85% of their time out of school it is important that their first teachers are encouraged to continue that support. This paper outlines a New Zealand project ‘Home School Partnership: Numeracy’ that gives one approach to enhancing children’s mathematical learning through shared understandings between home and school.

Introduction

Home School Partnership in New Zealand refers to a partnership between schools and homes not to be confused with home schooling. Whereas home schooling involves parents/caregivers teaching their children in their homes, home school partnership is an attempt by schools and children’s families to bring understanding and clarification about numeracy to both parties. With the changing of government new policies have been implemented and a timely one has been a call for plain language reporting to parents. Power and control is an unfair advantage when only one party understands the language.

With the numeracy project implemented in 2000 new terms have resurfaced or been born. Tidy numbers is a new one and belonging to that term are all numbers that end in zero. It seems an easy idea to understand and that many children will be able to give an example. What is not so easy for some children to understand is how useful tidy numbers can be. Making ten has been around for many years but connecting knowledge about 0 – 9 with larger numbers seems to be something some children miss out on and parents have not been privy to that knowledge.

Within the context of this paper the word ‘parents’ will refer to the collective body of parents, caregivers and whanau, who are the people schools communicate with in regard to the children.

Why Home School Partnership?

Overwhelmingly the evidence points to the fact that parental involvement helps children’s learning. With the large amount of time that children are not in classrooms, schools need to develop strong supportive links with each family they have at school. Even with their high success rate in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study Foong (2004) maintains schools in Singapore are “beginning to see the advantage of engaging parents in the education of their children” (p. 49). Bull, Brooking and Campbell (2008) found research literature shows “parental involvement makes a significant difference to educational achievement” (p. 1). In their body of work Anthony and Walshaw also confirmed many educators and researchers believe if parents are involved in their children’s education there will be positive outcomes (2007). The Ministry of Education (2008) in their booklet Home School Partnership: Numeracy also endorsed the importance of parental involvement “...when parents, children, and school staff work together, there are more opportunities for children’s learning to improve” (p. 3). There does appear to be some debate about the degree of validity between involvement and achievement but whichever the way the discussion goes it is certain that parent involvement affects factors that impact on children’s achievement (Peressini, 1998).

While asserting it is difficult to find the kind of involvement that makes the difference, Bull et al. (2008) did suggest common features that point to successful HSP:

- Relationships in successful home – school partnerships are collaborative and mutually respectful
- Successful home-school partnerships are multi-dimensional, and responsive to community needs
- Successful home-school partnerships are planned for: embedded within whole school development plans; well resourced and regularly reviewed
- Successful partnerships are goal oriented and focussed on learning
- Effective parental engagement happens largely at home
- There is a timely two-way communication between school and parents in successful partnerships (p. 1).

Pakeha and Asian children generally have higher achievement levels than Maori and Pasifika children but that does not mean only parents of the former group want their children to ‘do well’. Schools are

required to work with all parents to help fulfil their hopes of their child 'doing well'. Doing well in this instance means a child having the success they are capable of achieving. In his opening speech at a national numeracy conference Maharey (then Minister of Education) said, "...engaging families and communities in a meaningful way with the teaching and learning of their children, is an area where we need to do more work" (2006). A low decile rating in New Zealand is not an excuse for a child's lack of progress. It may mean schools may have to work harder and smarter to build children's confidence and motivation through other ways such as fostering close home school partnerships while taking into consideration the common features above.

Background to Home School Partnership in New Zealand

With increasing numbers of Pasifika people and other ethnic groups into the country over the last 20 years it became evident that cultural inclusion was an aspect schools needed to attend to. How could they communicate the ideas of how children learn to read, write and do mathematics in the New Zealand system with parents whose first language was not English?

A Pasifika initiative aimed at considering key literacy messages with parents was implemented in 2001; Home School Partnership: Literacy (HSPL). It aimed to use parents as leaders as a means of encouraging other parents to attend sessions, and to use the time to establish better relationships, closer communication ties and encourage ways in which parents could be involved in helping their children with reading and writing. Evaluations showed that schools that adapted the programme to suit their community needs had more successful outcomes than schools that stayed with the original model and 80% of the schools reported that "parental involvement had a positive impact on children's opportunity to learn" (Bull et al, 2008).

On the other side of the government's strategy Phase 1 of the Numeracy Development Project was being implemented so it wasn't until 2006 that a pilot for Home School Partnership: Numeracy (HSPN) was realised. Following on from the success of the literacy project, the positive remarks and growing interest made by the parents, HSPN closely followed the literacy model at first. Outside (of the school staff) numeracy facilitators throughout New Zealand began to attend every session their schools held in a supportive role. They were also used to offset any difficult questions that may be asked.

Forty schools were in the pilot, the same number the following year with increasing numbers in 2008 and 2009. Evaluations showed that schools did not stay with the original model but adapted to their school's needs and aspects of HSPN helped improve the way they connected with parents even if they discontinued the project (Fisher & Neill, 2008).

Home School Partnership: Numeracy based on Six Schools

Throughout New Zealand several schools are or have implemented the project but for the purpose of this paper the picture can be seen through the story of six schools in the southern reaches of the country and how they implemented HSPN by looking at commonalities they shared.

Rationale

Although the six Principals had differing ideas of why they wanted HSPN in their schools they were in agreement on one matter and that was there was little recognition of a partnership with families in numeracy. The same parents were often in their schools helping with reading groups, sports days, library work, parent teacher meetings and concerts but never in numeracy. While Posamentier said "mathematics is the only subject about which adults can cheerfully exclaim they know nothing and still be thought of as intelligent and even educated," Principals were 'taken aback' at the number of parents who did 'cheerfully exclaim' they couldn't do maths and they expected that their children would be the same (Principals, personal communication, May 9, 2008). In a world when we are striving for excellence and teachers have high expectations it is imperative that everyone involved with children's education have the same expectations. Parents as well as teachers must believe children can do well with encouragement and support.

Partnership

In developing a partnership between home and school all schools discussed what sort of partnership they were trying to achieve. Schools wanted to encourage clear lines of communication between home and school. Newsletters, although they kept parents informed, were always going one way. Co-operation and collaboration were aspects the schools hoped would eventually build to a two way partnership. However, they realised as community sessions were held, that parents were interested in the school's numeracy programme and felt they had little to offer themselves. Schools reviewed their

goal and decided they wanted parents to come to their sessions and enjoy themselves especially as some parents had expressed some negativity towards mathematics. Although the partnership was not equal schools felt it was something that would develop over time. One of the ways to help schools move to a more equitable partnership was to appoint a Lead Teacher in Numeracy (LT) for HSPN and two or three Lead Parents (LPs) depending on the size of the school.

Role of the Lead Teacher and Lead Parents

The role of the LT, who was a member of the teaching staff, was to support a team of LPs with planning, preparation and to co - facilitate community sessions. The LT also liaised with staff so that everyone understood what HSPN involved and what part they could play in promoting a numeracy partnership with the parents. An ability to relate well to people was an essential attribute for the LT and LPs. Lead Parents had a pivotal role to play in building the partnership and relationship with the community. In areas where large numbers of different ethnic groups lived LPs were sometimes chosen because they were bilingual. A key focus was to encourage those families to feel comfortable in the school settings by talking to them in their own language. Only one of the six schools had a significant number of Pasifika parents but they were first generation New Zealanders with competent English. However, they were encouraged to use both languages when counting or playing games.

Aspects that LTs and LPs agreed to foster in all schools were:

- to acknowledge parents as the children's first teachers
- to recognise parents' language and culture as important for their child's learning
- to learn from the parents as parents learn from the school
- to encourage ways in which parents could help their children in numeracy
- to create an environment where parents felt comfortable
- to encourage all teaching staff to participate in evening community sessions

Community Sessions

All schools followed the same format for their community sessions. Four planning days were set involving the outside facilitator, the Lead teacher in Numeracy and Lead Parents with four afternoons or evenings for delivery. Planning for a community session which typically lasted 1½ - 2 hours took a full day to plan. All schools covered the same topics:

Session 1	Session 2
sharing of mathematical experiences counting framework addition and subtraction	numeracy strategy stages part whole thinking basic facts
Session 3	Session 4
revision of strategy stages place value	multiplication facts multiplication and Division

Of the six schools three decided to hold a fifth session which was a celebratory night with parents, teachers and children participating in activities at different stations and competing for spot prizes.

Food played an important part especially if children were to be at all or part of the community sessions. It is culturally acceptable to offer food when visitors arrive at one's house and that tradition is practiced in schools.

During the sessions parents were given simple messages that would be useful when supporting their children. An example of one message was counting forwards and backwards. Many parents counted forwards with their small children but never counted backwards until they could see the relevance to subtraction. Another message was the difficulty young five and six year olds experienced learning the teen numbers. They could count by rote but not recognise 12 or 13.

In all schools LPs were nervous about facing other parents but to ease them into their first 'public role' they were given activities that they could introduce and play with the parents. "Incorporating school like activities, through providing parents with access to both additional pedagogical knowledge and information about finding and using local educational resources, can have dramatic and positive impacts on children's achievement" (Biddulph, Biddulph & Biddulph, 2003, p. v).

One game that LPs felt comfortable with was 'missing number bingo'. It was a game that helped children focus on number before and number after. Part of the success of the games was that parents were able to take a game home after the first session and then add to them after each consecutive session. A frequent comment from children at school was *"we've been playing those games at home"*

and they're fun". As not all children's parent were attending the community sessions backpacks containing games, dice and counters were sent home on a rotation basis between the other children. Teachers reported parents asked more questions, were knowledgeable and interested about the strategy stages and sought more ideas of how they could further support their children. Through 'postits' as they left or by comments about the sessions parents expressed their enjoyment and the growing confidence they felt when discussing numeracy with their children at home.

Conclusion

As part of their reflective review the schools compared their sessions to the common features (Bull et al, 2008). The schools felt they had achieved all with the exception of the two way communication between school and parents. All realised they still had some way to go before they were sure they had achieved a real partnership.

Good LTs, LPs and strong leadership from Principals, who turned up for every session, made a difference. Principals and staff attendance signalled to parents that they thought a home school partnership was valuable and likewise the number of parents at each session was an indicator to teachers that they were supported. Parents found different ways they could help their children with the new knowledge they had acquired and teachers found they were not alone in educating the children in their classes.

Building a partnership can take time as both parties move towards listening and learning about the numeracy they both have to offer. Ultimately HSPN is about the children and supporting them in their learning.

This paper has only given a glimpse of what HSPN is like in New Zealand. In pockets throughout the country facilitators, teachers and parents are working together to involve more of their community by engaging in their children's education. A connected partnership of home and school has a strong influence on children's achievement. Anyone who has shown an interest in children cannot help but see the impact a smile or a positive remark can make. Having one's parents involved in what is happening in school has the same effect.

Building harmonious relationships between school, families and communities can have reciprocal benefits for all concerned. Parents develop more understanding of the school's programme and appreciate their children's numeracy knowledge while home and community environments offer a rich source of numeracy experiences on which to base and enhance that learning in school (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 3).

Acknowledgement

Further information on HSPN booklet and games can be found on www.nzmaths.co.nz

The views expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect that of University of Otago College of Education or the Ministry of Education.

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